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CHAPTER I

OUTLINE OF CULTURE IN MALEKULA

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

THE islands of the New Hebrides form a long archipelago stretching for about 400 miles from north to south between the 165th and 170th parallels of South Latitude and the 13th and 20th degrees of West Longitude, about midway between the Solomon Islands and Fiji, and flanked on the south-west by the Loyalty Islands and New Caledonia.

The southern islands of this archipelago are few and far between. In the centre is the island of Fate, with Vila, the port of call. Close by, on small islets, are two Polynesian-speaking communities whose ancestors are thought to have drifted over from Polynesia in comparatively recent times, but which have not greatly affected the culture of their neighbours. Some fifty miles northward of Fate the archipelago divides, one branch going due north and the other north-west. The nodal point where these two branches divide is a volcanic area containing two active craters, one on the small island of Lopevi consisting of a single volcano rising sheer from the sea, and the other on the larger island of Ambrim where, in 1913, a whole Mission station was engulfed in an eruption. Westward of this lies the southern portion of Malekula, an island sixty miles long, forming the base of the north-westerly branch of the archipelago. Off its south-eastern coast lie the Maskelyne Islands, and at the western extremity of its southern coastline is South-West Bay, where Deacon did most of his field-work. It is from this southern and south-western region of Malekula that the artificially elongated skulls found in so many museums have been acquired, cranial deformation not being practised in the more northerly regions of the island. It is here also that exists the elaborate mortuary ritual during the course of which these skulls are mounted on wooden effigies and preserved in the men's houses.

Very different from the relative isolation of South Malekula is the situation of the Small Islands that lie off its north-eastern coast. They are in the fortunate position of facing inwards towards the comparatively enclosed inland sea bounded on the south by Ambrim, on the east by Raga [1] which stretches due north of Ambrim, on the north-east by Oba, and on the north-west by Malo and the largest island of the group called Santo. The islands that bound this inland sea, together with Maewo [2]

[1] Also called Pentecost.

[2] Also called Aurora.

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which lies due north of Raga, constituted for the Small Islanders, before the coming of the white man, the utmost limits of the world. Each had, and still has in their eyes, its special character.

Thus, Ambrim is first and foremost the home of the dead of high rank, who, wandering from the Small Islands down the east coast of Malekula, are transported by a ghostly ferryman to the opposite shore, whence they climb on to the volcano and there carry on life after death. This island (among the natives inhabiting whose shores Deacon discovered the 6-section systems of kinship already mentioned) forms part of the predominately patrilineal area to which Malekula and the Small Islands also belong. In this area, though matrilineal descent is given due weight, the overt organisation is patrilineal with patrilocal residence, that is to say that all men remain within their father's village and marry women from other villages. To this patrilineal area belongs also the southern part of Raga regarding which Père Tattevin has written an important memoir. These islands of Malekula and Ambrim, together with the southern part of Raga, are collectively referred to as the North-Central New Hebrides.

Immediately to the north are the Northern New Hebrides, in all of which overt descent is matrilineal, and in which society is based on what is called a dual organisation consisting of two exogamous matrilineal moieties. This division between an overtly patrilineal area in the south and a matrilineal dual organisation area in the north embraces both branches of the archipelago, the dividing line running due east and west between Malo and Malekula on the one hand and across the middle of Raga on the other. In the minds of the Small Islanders the dual organisation is particularly connected with the islands to the north-east, namely North Raga, Oba and Maewo, all of which are also regarded as the home of the creator-deity known in the Northern New Hebrides as Tagaro and in Vao as Ta-ghar. Particularly is this the case with regard to Oba, to which special pilgrimages are made for the sake of initiation into sex, and which white men have called Lepers Island on account of the light, almost Polynesian coloured skin of its inhabitants.

To the north-west lie Malo and the large island of Santo with its very mixed population, who, though also in the dual organisation area, by no means share the reverential attitude accorded to the inhabitants of the north-eastern islands and are visited chiefly on account of the turmeric which they produce and which is used by the Small Islanders as a basic dye for their few articles of clothing. Students of European colonial expansion will remember that the full name of Santo is Terra Australis del Espiritu Santo, so called by Quiros when in 1606 he, the first white man to sight it, landed to found New Jerusalem on a site now entirely lost.

Northward of the New Hebrides lie the two small archipelagos called the Banks and Torres Islands, which are beyond the ken of the

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escape these currents are unmixed with this and therefore called "white sand." On these same currents float the pieces of pumice-stone that the natives use for various purposes, including the removal of superfluous hair from their chins, while from the island of Ambrim itself is brought in canoes the hard volcanic stone from which rain-stones (see Plate XXIV, 1) are carved. The Ambrim volcano plays, moreover, a very active part in beliefs concerning the home of the dead held in the Small Islands, whence (though Vao, the most northerly of these islets, lies forty miles away) all the dead of high rank are said to journey down the east coast of Malekula and over the ten-mile strait to Ambrim, where they climb up to the crater and there for evermore dance every night and rest sleeping by day. Rivers in fact goes so far as to suggest that the presence of volcanoes such as this and others in Melanesia may to some extent have determined the settlement of early migrants from other volcanic areas having similar beliefs.

Like all New Hebridean islands, however, apart from the smoke sometimes issuing from the crater and the accompanying dull red glow which is by no means always present, Ambrim, as well as the opposing Malekulan coast, wears the monotonous dark green mantle of bush growing right down to the water's edge, showing no sign of the life going on in the native villages which it engulfs. At most points approach is dangerous even at a distance, owing to the treacherous reefs that jut out sometimes far into the sea. On one of these, sprawling out from the Malekulan promontory of Bong-na-un near Pangkumu, there stands a giant upright coral block, which, according to the belief held in some of the Small Islands, represents the Guardian Ghost waiting to devour the ghosts of the dead unless propitiated with the gift of a pig, which in turn is the ghost of one sacrificed by surviving kinsmen at the dead man's grave.[1] It is from here that, having passed this ordeal, the dead man gathers fuel with which to light a beacon to attract the attention of the ghostly ferryman on Ambrim who will conduct him to the opposite shore, and any small pieces of driftwood or dried banana skins that may be seen floating off it are said by the natives to be his canoes.

After this, the heavy coastline continues unrelieved by islands till a long low promontory stretching out into the sea encloses a wide mangrove shark-infested swamp behind which, in the low foothills, are said to live sorcerers called Ghamba Lep,[2] capable of flight and of assuming the shape of snakes and other things and of so harming the dwellers of the mainland villages.

[1] This is the belief held in Atchin and Wala which contrasts with the Vao belief (see p. 13) that the Guardian Ghost is met with in the cave. For further information on this see pp. 227, 233.

[2] See p. 238.